

## **Access Montana**

### **For New State Parks and Fishing Access Sites**

**1. Why does FWP need to buy more state parks and fishing access sites?**

The state of Montana has outstanding natural and cultural resources with a proud outdoor heritage that we need to pass on to our children. We have an opportunity now to provide for the future.

Public access is a major concern of Montana's residents all across the state. Recreational land values are increasing at a rate of approximately 24% annually in some locations according to a prominent regional appraisal firm. Securing public access to these lands will never get cheaper. The \$15 million amount is approximately 1.5% of the surplus that would be invested in a long-term legacy for our citizens.

In addition, it is a well-known fact that parks and fishing activities provide important economic benefits to local communities. Park and FAS users spend over \$212 million annually.

**2. Doesn't FWP have the money in the bank already? Why are general fund dollars needed?**

While it looks like FWP has money in the bank, most of those funds are earmarked or already obligated for specific purposes. For example:

- Habitat Montana's fund balance can only be used for critical wildlife habitat, not parks or FAS property.
- Only the interest from the coal tax trust fund is statutorily available to support operations of the park system.
- The general license account has a fund balance but those funds cannot be redirected away from specific uses, which do not include park land acquisitions. In addition, much of this fund is obligated or must sustain the department's core budget.
- Parks has a modest fund balance, most of which is obligated for on-going major maintenance efforts.
- While sportsmen have been very willing to fund conservation and habitat acquisitions, State Parks do not have a dedicated funding source for acquisitions. This one-time funding would be a great opportunity to purchase significant park sites and FASs before they are purchased by private interests and closed to public use.

**3. I thought there was an FAS acquisition account. Why not use that money for purchasing FASs?**

There is an earmarked FAS account created in the 1970s from fees added to fishing licenses. Fifty percent of this fund must be used for operations and maintenance and 50% may be used for acquisition. The earmarked fee has not increased since the program's inception. Because

of increased public use of FASs, more of the funding—an additional 25%—is being shifted from acquisition to maintenance this biennium.

Montana now manages 316 FASs. Montana has some of the best public river access in the nation. The Access Montana funds provide a great opportunity to enhance the program further by purchasing a few more public sites, while also allowing FWP to invest more in operations and management of FASs.

**4. *Where will the new sites be? How many parks and FASs can be expected?***

No decisions have been made yet, but FWP has developed selection criteria to help identify what the best sites would look like. These criteria consider: size, location, community support, cost to operate, ability to generate revenue, proximity to an adjacent town, significance, etc.

It is expected that we will have a number of new FASs statewide and a couple of new parks, but much of the final outcome will depend on cost.

**5. *How are you going to pay for the long-term operations and development of these sites?***

Long-term operations and maintenance of state parks and fishing access sites is not easy to address. Montana's growing population and increased use of these public sites will continue to put pressure on the system.

Budget decisions are dynamic and require the involvement of the legislature and the Office of Budget and Program Planning. FWP will pursue ways to increase revenues and re-evaluate priorities with support and approval of the legislature.

The proposed Access Montana funding includes \$500,000 to pay for private sector appraisals, surveys, title work, and for immediate ownership needs such as weed control, fencing and any other "good neighbor" issues, which FWP addresses until a site or park can be opened to the public.

**6. *How can you ask for more parks if you don't have enough money or staff to manage the existing ones?***

Land acquisition decisions are rarely easy and land will never be cheaper. The opportunity to acquire new public sites needs to be weighed against existing operation and maintenance needs. The purchase of special lands that expands public access does not mean it has to be staffed immediately upon acquisition. Operations and maintenance can be funded incrementally. Sites like Rosebud Battlefield are often overseen by staff from another existing park until use levels and demands increase. Once funds become available and demands increase, FWP will prioritize those needs against other parks.

FWP has shown it can acquire sites and support limited public use until operations funding can be found. One example of this "mothballing" strategy is Rosebud Battlefield State Park. Purchased in 1978, the park will be developed and managed based on a management planning process currently underway.